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In opener, Boston Pops mix it up with Zeppelin, 'Star Wars' and MacFarlane

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Keith Lockhart, conductor, left, and Seth MacFarlane, soloist, perform in the season... [+]



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Keith Lockhart, conductor, left, and Seth MacFarlane, soloist, perform in the season...
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By Keith Powers

For The Patriot Ledger

There was a time when Keith Lockhart was the brash young conductor in the Boston Symphony family. That time may be gone, but as Lockhart opened the 131st Boston Pops season Friday night – his 22nd with the orchestra – you can see he’s still got what it takes.

Andris Nelsons may be that brash young conductor now, and he had the nerve to take the Boston Symphony – and all of the regular Pops orchestra – off to Europe for a tour. But Lockhart led the Pops Esplanade Orchestra, who were making the most of their time on the Symphony Hall stage, through a terrific display of the musically high and the musically low.

They shared the stage with television personality Seth MacFarlane – or rather, stayed in the background when MacFarlane entertained after intermission – but the playing was top-notch, whether they were ceding the spotlight or not.

Lockhart’s first half choices showed the stuff the Pops is made of – from Bernstein to Dvorak to Ellington to Led Zeppelin to “Star Wars” – with hardly a pause.

The highlight of the serious music selections was the Largo from Dvorak’s New World Symphony. English hornist Barbara LaFitte etched the aching solo line, which keeps coming back and gets passed through multiple sections of the ensemble, with articulation and poise.

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“Stairway to Heaven” was a highlight of a different kind, showing off, as Lockhart pointed out, the vast Pops repertory of arranged tunes – arrangements that transform styles like power rock into orchestral gems. Electric guitarist Jonathan Finn did his best Jimmy Page, and oboist Andrew Price sent everyone up to heaven with a delicate outro.

Ellington’s “Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got that Swing” – with terrific solos all around the stage – and the latest from Pops Laureate Conductor John Williams’ “Star Wars” opus – the closing music to “The Force Awakens” – wrapped up the versatile first part of the show.

Then it was time for MacFarlane. If there’s an empty stage or screen, you can bet Seth MacFarlane is doing something to fill it. He’s a writer, with television credits like “Family Guy” and “American Dad.” He produced the popular “Cosmos” series. He’s hosted the Comedy Central Roasts, and the Academy Awards. He directed the “Ted” films, and others.





And he sings. He’s got several albums of standards, and his pops credits including not only appearances at Symphony Hall, but at The Proms as well. His style channels Sinatra, and with his piano trio in front of the orchestra, he crooned his way through a generous selection of film and lounge standards.

Entertaining while he did it. As he killed off a carafe of some unidentified golden liquid – “playing one of my favorite drinking games,” he said, “that is, drink as much as you like because you’re an adult” – he voiced some of his television creations, bashed a certain billionaire politician, and tried out some local flavor jokes using Dunkin Donuts and Deflategate.



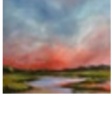

He also showed a deep love for the American songbook, and a devotee’s appreciation for the greatness of arrangers like Nelson Riddle. MacFarlane has a pleasant enough baritone, knows his way around a mike, and has listened to enough Sinatra to know how his unique phrasing works – just a little off the beat, to make it sound humanly imperfect, but genuinely appealing.

He sang a dozen tunes – highlights included slow-tempoed ballads like the nicely articulated “It Worries Me” and “Autumn in New York.” He treated the audience to three encores, clearing the orchestra off the stage for his finale – “One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)” – his trio backing him lushly as the orchestra grabbed their instruments and headed offstage.

The Boston Pops 131st Spring Season runs through June 18. For tickets and

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